



EMBODY

CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURAL GLASS

Aesa Björk Thorsteinsdóttir

Tanja Heyer

Anna Norberg

Bruno Romanelli

Françoise Sergy

Angela Thwaites

Emma Woffenden

Kim Willis



FOREWORD

Embodiment is the first international glass exhibition to be specially commissioned by the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art. The exhibition draws a parallel between the inherent fragility and strength of glass and the human body. From senses of taste, touch and sight, to explorations of breath, chemical processes, mortality, interior and exterior form the exhibition explores how the body interacts with and is defined by its environment. The use of glass as the medium for exploring ideas surrounding the body is integral to each work.

The realisation of *Embodiment* was made possible by the generous support of the Crafts Council through an initial research bursary awarded to Ann Fletcher and a subsequent exhibition award to NGCA. The Arts Council have kindly supported the commissioning of Emma Woffenden and Françoise Sergy's cross-disciplinary performance.

Held to celebrate the opening of the National Glass Centre, *Embodiment* aims to demonstrate, promote and contribute to the development of sculptural glass making. The exhibition showcases contemporary practitioners whose material and processes have firm roots in traditional craft practice and whose work addresses conceptual and intellectual concerns. The exhibition would not have been developed so cogently had it not been for the patience, enthusiasm and commitment of the exhibiting artists in developing their new work.

Ann Fletcher
Co-Curator

Ele Carpenter
Co-Curator

A N E S S A Y B Y M A R T I N A M A R G E T T S

The title of this exhibition is appropriate in several ways. The objects in it give material form to ideas; the ideas themselves are sparked by the human body; the works are realised by the actions of the body; and the exhibition draws together into a unity different interpretations of the ideas and of working methods in glass.

In *The Origins of Form* Herbert Read said, 'the will to form is the essence of being'. The form humankind has chosen through which to express its sense of self has most often been a representation of the body. Cave painters or Greek sculptors sought to represent its active or idealised self by exploring essence through appearance rather than abstracted metaphor. Later representations of the human body have similarly explained human identity through portraiture, narrative, history and genre painting or sculpture.

In the twentieth century art has emphasised the abstract, the hidden, the intangible. At the same time, our perceptions about the body, and the position of the individual self in society, have fundamentally altered. Marx's analysis of the impact of society and economics on the individual, and vice versa, and Freud's perception that our interior, unconscious lives fundamentally affect the body politic, the health and wealth of nations, has assisted this shift. Marx's seminal comment - 'All that is solid melts into air' - has set a tone for the twentieth century as a fragmented, destabilised, dematerialised society which artists, from cubists and futurists to conceptualists, have sought to interpret and shape.

The optimism which in the early modern era coalesced around man and machine working in harmony - in industry, medicine, science, technology, architecture and the arts - has mutated into a more sceptical speculation. In this pre-millennial moment, we ask whether technology is always progressive and benign, or whether dematerialisation is being carried to extremes. The internet, virtual reality, the microwave, TV, answering machine, cash machine, fast food, drive-in restaurant, are removing our bodies from direct human contact and experience; soon we may even be cloned.

This is the ambivalent, androgynous, postmodern, posthuman climate in which this exhibition takes place and in which these eight exhibitors work and evolve their ideas. It is not only a western, but a global climate now. The choice of glass as their primary medium for expression of thought about the body is appropriate for two reasons. First, glass as a material is a paradigm for the body: it can be soft and hard, cold and warm, light and heavy, tough and vulnerable, thick and thin, viscous and brittle, transparent and opaque. Its techniques too, provide an empathetic vocabulary: glass can be inflated, slumped, folded, cracked, wrinkled, cut, bent, fused, moulded, colourful, monochrome. Secondly, glass as a medium for the expression of ideas is relatively new and this exhibition provides a landmark opportunity in Britain to affirm glass as emphatically a medium for sculpture.

Whereas internationally, glass sculpture has often been ghettoised within the art world by material, in *Embody* the equality of material and ideas with sculpture in general is emphasised by the conjunction of glass with other materials and media - video, found objects, performance, photography, mixed media. Françoise Sergy, for example, combines performance, digital imaging and installations to record the emotional effects of bodily operations, especially IVF and LH which try to promote pregnancy. The thwarted wish to be a mother emphasises expectation and longing, a poignant state of suspended animation in which, in Freudian terms, the need to fill the void of existence cannot be fulfilled, only expressed through desire.

Sergy's use of glass is symbolic. As the only exhibitor untrained in glass, she uses the material architecturally to define space and physically to allude to difficult experiences. She has collaborated with Emma Woffenden for the *LH Phantom* performance and installation, both commissioned for the exhibition. In this work the glass-block base represents the hard, cold hospital bed as well as echoing institutional spaces divided by such blocks, where people and events are only partially revealed. The huge glassblown 'glove' by Woffenden which Sergy wears in the performance, is 'heavy, symbolic of holding a child I don't have, a weight that I have to bear'. Sergy adds to the bleak, ritualised setting with projections of ultrasound pictures of everyday objects - teddy bears, light bulb - and her X-rays. 'When you are being treated,' Sergy explains, 'you are very exposed: the inside of you is being revealed, but in a very clinical way.' It is as if perhaps the organic is subject to control, hi-tech is dominating nature.

In making her theme the body itself, a site of transgression and transformation, Sergy reaffirms the body 'as intelligent and essential to us. I'm trying to say in a modern rather than a spiritual way that the body is a universe'. Sergy views it, 'with acceptance, rather than the wish to re-programme it or change.' She disapproves of cosmetic surgery, and of artists such as Orlan who explore/exploit this. 'My work is experimental, not aesthetic. I'm not concerned with appearance.' Sergy also maintains a feminist viewpoint, in a humanist, not triumphalist way: 'In the 1990s, there has been a huge backlash against the idea that women are oppressed - but I think they *are*. Some women are getting to the top and playing the system, but I *know* women being powerful is still the exception.'

Woffenden's own work for *Embody* also uses space and narrative to speak of the human condition. The space is reduced to essentials, like Donald Judd, but nevertheless it appears like a place of incident, as if something has just happened, but it is unclear what. It is a metaphor for the body: there are experiences and sensations which we cannot always interpret. In using large-scale found objects in the space, such as filing cabinets, together with glass works the disorientation and unease are exaggerated.

All Woffenden's work in glass contains bodily reference: womb, phallus, foetus, DNA. In their vestigial appearance, there is suffocation, constriction, brutality and aggression, but also a sense of the release that creativity brings. There are echoes of sculptures and installations by Louise Bourgeois and Rebecca Horn: the most feared perceptions about our bodies, ourselves, are brought to light and examined and brought under control. In this cathartic process lies reconciliation with the self and others and with existence.

There are both Freudian and Jungian concepts within this approach. Woffenden says that people find her glass sculptures 'quite scary - because they are so incredibly empty.' The death drive which Freud conceptualises suggests that we are all both drawn towards, yet repelled by, death. We test its power yet retreat from it, often back towards the womb, wanting to be safely and reassuringly contained. Yet containment can prove to be a stultifying or disillusioning experience - an empty vessel - so that we riskily propel ourselves again toward the unknown, potentially fatal, new experience.

Woffenden's work, together with other exhibits, also embodies the Jungian concept of the reconciliation of opposites, whereby we come to accept the male/female elements within ourselves, and seek completion of the missing male/female parts of ourselves in others. Also relevant is Jung's passionate engagement in the understanding of alchemy, the medieval philosopher's search for the method of turning base metals into gold. This metaphor, for achieving perfection from imperfection, order out of chaos, rationality from irrationality, underlies the quest by these exhibitors to elicit from investigations into the body a more rational understanding of the human condition. The medium of glass provides its own kind of alchemy to underpin this quest.

The Icelandic artist *Æsa Björk Thorsteinsdóttir*, expresses the 'functions and dysfunctions' of the body by combining glass with materials such as rubber, steel, cement and wax. *Last d'Vision* interprets her encounter with German physiologist Wilhelm Kühne's 'optograms' of the 1870s. Kühne's experiments had involved a rabbit facing a barred window and capturing on its retina the window image, demonstrating that the retina of the eye behaves like a photographic studio, continually supplying 'photographic plates' on which to capture images. The work *Retinal d'Vision* draws a direct parallel between the chemical coating Rhodopsin and liquid light.

As with the three exhibitors already mentioned, Thorsteinsdóttir creates an architectural space containing objects in which to locate her ideas about human perception and experience. She describes her process and its meaning: 'The story combined with the video images of the eye remind me of the passing of time and summarised a feeling I so often have of linking the outside with the inside. The blinds of a blink, with the surface of time and a vision which could be the last, the first, or the middle, stored in retinal bowls of glass.' Walking in this installation, the artist's 'laboratory', we are aware of the gaze being turned back on us. The vulnerabilities of artist and audience are revealed and interact - a double exposure.

The viscosity of molten glass, literally forming ideas, and the operation of light, gives glass this opportunity to 'crystallise' ideas about what we see. It is not surprising that many artists working in glass are absorbed by photography, which has a similar relationship to the capturing of a moment through light and material. Angela Thwaites makes the observing of what we see the basis of her work. Her cast glass series is entitled *Witness*, 'because we witness and receive lasting visual and emotional impressions constantly, which affect and shape who we are and the way we see the world.' The works also 'bear witness to the process of making - the forms have been impressed, pushed, pummelled, cut and carved.'

The objects which Thwaites casts suggest eye forms - tactile, sensual, other-worldly things - enhanced by the blue colour, a cliché in glass, which here makes the viewer do a double-take. Playing with the language of glass to metaphorical ends encourages us to be more aware of what we see. While both Thorsteinsdóttir and Thwaites explore perception, the latter favours emotional rather than scientific investigation. In reference to *Tear Seeds*, Thwaites says: 'I have done a lot of grieving in my life, but out of that comes something better than before.'

Thwaites says: 'I have a fear of going blind, the sense I would most hate to lose. Eyes are windows to the soul: they carry a lot of human qualities - looking away, looking people in the eye.' This emphasis on the senses as a positive source of experience and expression is reflected also in the work of Tanja Heyer. She says: 'The senses can *enrich* life if you use them more consciously', citing touch to get the feel of a structure and materials and to perceive emotional states and smell (especially after reading Patrick Süskind's book, *Perfume*). Heyer is fascinated by glass as a medium: 'Glass is a challenge; you can't control it completely - although it is not the glass which brought me to where I am.'

There is an aspect of self-portraiture in Heyer's ideas. Besides wittily exploring all five senses, she explores non-verbal communication through sculptural images of speech patterns and through clothing. Her glass dress, formed from a latex and plaster cast on her body, is not intended to be a literal

description but to convey an existential moment frozen in time; it is a specimen for observation which Heyer is nevertheless pleased refers obliquely to her own persona.

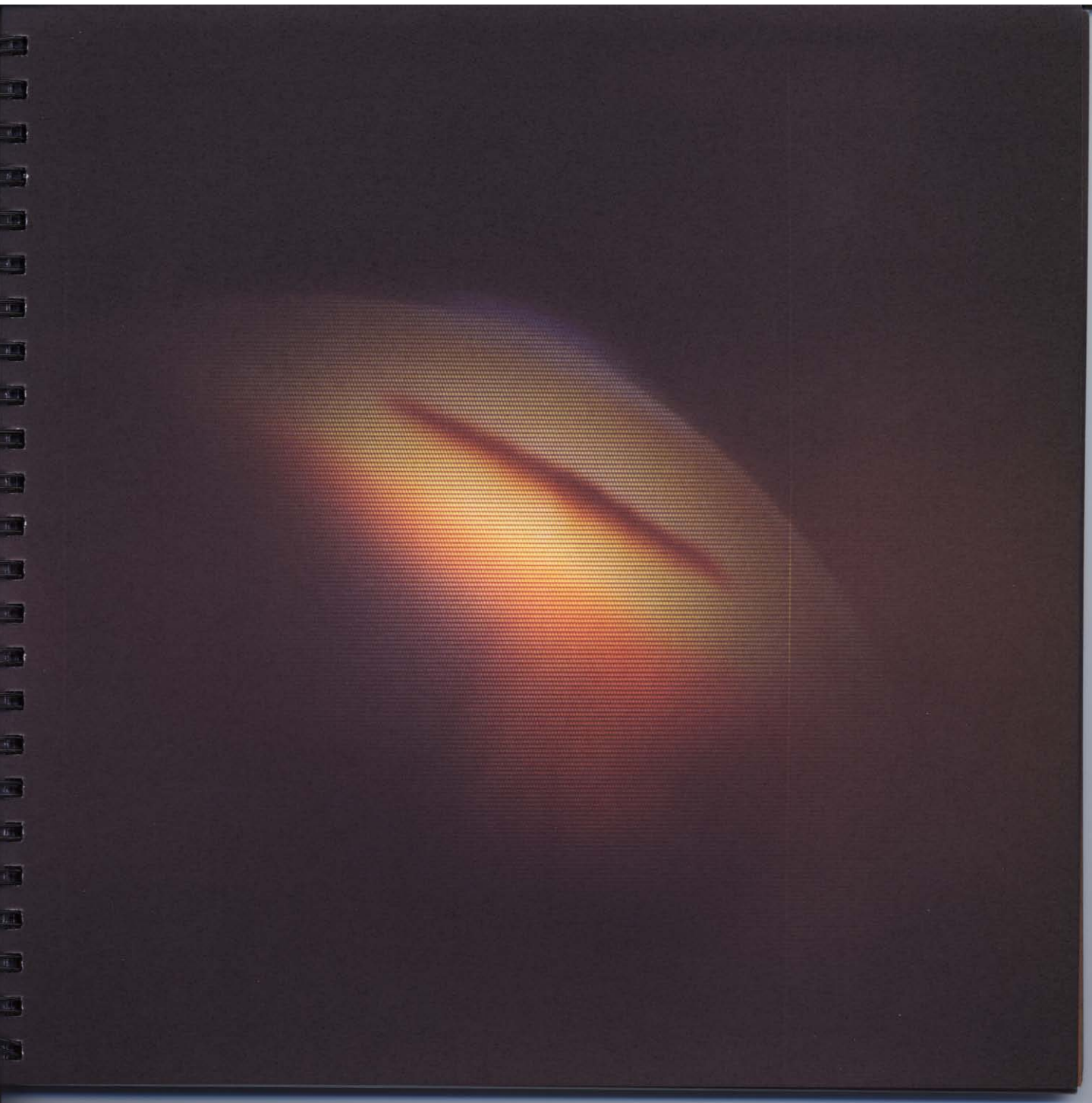
The residual presence of herself in real time and space is important to Heyer. 'I wouldn't like to be taken away from real experience', she says of computer technology. 'It is fascinating, but scary.' This ambivalence about our bodies, our social context, our temporal and idealised states, has always existed, but in different forms. Heyer's reading of Huysmans' *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*, published 114 years ago) confirms her anguish that human beings must not succumb to artificial stimulation, that they must travel in real time, experiencing the natural world and direct forms of communication, verbal and non-verbal and through all five senses.

Kim Willis and Bruno Romanelli also assert the tangible self as evidence of human beauty, pleasure and understanding. Willis, observing her sister pregnant, creates *pâte de verre*, layers of white glass, conveying the purity and frank humanity of a soft, growing stomach. She marries the versatility and flexibility of the glass material with the human form, celebrating its ineffable qualities. 'The body is beautiful no matter what size.'

Romanelli's fragments of (his) body forms - a classical method - unites perception of the body with memory and experience. 'My masculinity is what I am talking about. It has its softness, roundness, vulnerability.' The element of biography of the self, evident throughout this exhibition, is by turns hidden and revealed, idealised and erotic, anguished and affirmative. All the exhibitors, in choosing *fragments* of the body to express their ideas, are portraying an honest picture of present reality: life is too complex, too stimulating, too global to offer the whole picture at any one time. This provisional/changeable state is something the exhibitors want to portray in their lives as well as their work. As Romanelli says of his homosexuality: 'I often feel I am expected to look, behave and speak in a certain way, as if identity is pre-determined. But I don't see anything as being fixed, even my identity. All this makes me what I am.'

Embody is a landmark exhibition in extending the identity of glass in Britain. As Thwaites says: 'I have always seen glass as a significantly sculptural medium, and I feel that it is only just beginning to be viewed seriously as such in Britain, where the predominant view of glass has been as a functional and decorative material.' One has only to contemplate Anna Norberg's electric chair, following the folded geometry of a body, like a tiny drawing both delicate and tense, to know that glass can embody every facet of man's universal experience - of what it is like to be mortal in the face of death.

Martina Margetts, June 1998



ÆSA BJÖRK THORSTEINSDÓTTIR

Æsa Björk Thorsteinsdóttir's new installation *Last d'Vision* is based on Kühne's experiments with optography in 1878 and the discovery of rhodopsin. The eye and retina are probed by the use of glass and video projections made in collaboration with Jane Winderen. *Last d'Vision* has recently been shown at Visningsgrommet Stiftelsen Kulturhuset USF, Bergen.

Thorsteinsdóttir studied with Vladmir Kopecky at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, Prague 1994 and graduated from Edinburgh College of Art BA 1995 and MA 1997. She currently lives in Bergen and has a studio at Kulturhuset USF.

Special thanks to Bergen Animasjon AS for editing *il* and *ill* and the Kavli Foundation.

Last d'Vision, 1998.

An installation in three parts:

il (projection on glass screen)

ill (cement hemisphere and video projection)

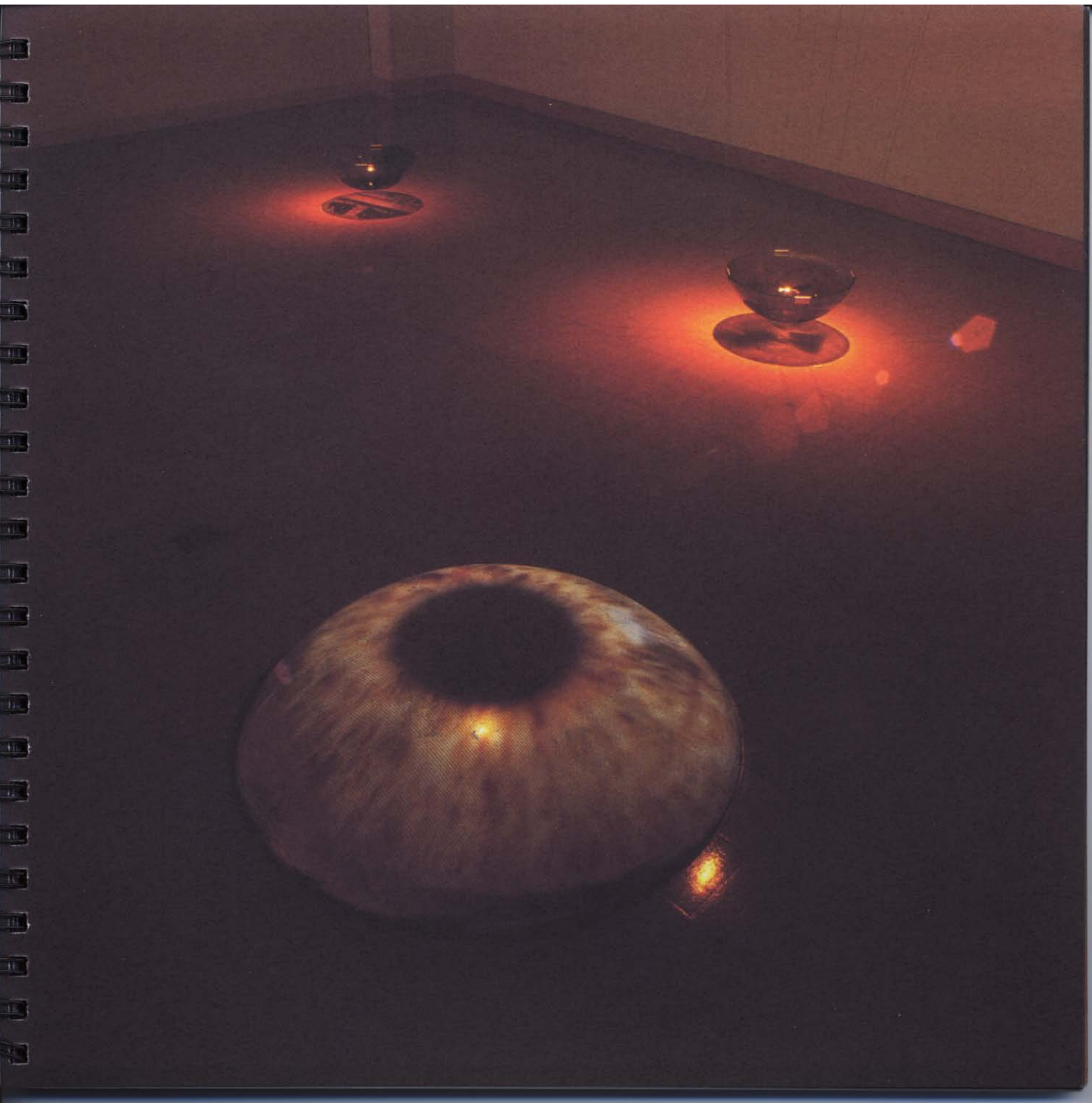
Retinal d'Visions 1 - 7, (glass, wire, liquid light)

Previous page: *il* (projection on glass screen).

Opposite: *ill* (cement hemisphere and video projection) foreground. *Retinal d'Visions 1 - 2* (glass, wire, liquid light) background.

'THE STORY COMBINED WITH THE VIDEO IMAGES OF THE EYE REMIND ME OF THE PASSING OF TIME AND SUMMARISED A FEELING I SO OFTEN HAVE OF LINKING THE OUTSIDE WITH THE INSIDE. THE BLINDS OF A BLINK, WITH THE SURFACE OF TIME AND A VISION WHICH COULD BE THE LAST, THE FIRST, OR THE MIDDLE, STORED IN RETINAL BOWLS OF GLASS.'

Æsa Björk Thorsteinsdóttir



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LIST OF ARTISTS WORKS

Æsa Björk Thorsteinsdóttir

Retinal d'Visions 1 - 7, (dia 44.5cm), glass - 1998

ii, (projection on glass screen) - 1998

iii, (dia 118cm), cement hemisphere and video projection - 1998

Tanja Heyer

It wears like a second skin, glass dress, (70x40x10cm), glass - 1998

Sweet & Sour, (30.45x15-20x10cm), glass - 1995

Trapped Words, (20x20x10x140cm), glass - 1996

Anna Norberg

I don't know what it looks like when someone dies - Electric Chair

(8x27x7cm), glass tubing, electric filament - 1998

Bruno Romanelli

Aura I, (49x9x13cm), glass - 1998

Aura II, (59x14x9cm), glass - 1998

Aura III, (61x14x14cm), glass - 1998

Memorized I, (61x12x8cm), glass - 1998

Internal Section I, (52x11x9cm), glass - 1998

Volume I, (24x42x15cm), glass - 1998

External Section I, (32x1413cm), glass - 1998

Françoise Sergy

The camera looking inside my uterus I, (53x42.5cm) - 1997

The camera looking inside my uterus 2, (53x42.5cm) - 1997

The camera looking inside my uterus 3, (53x42.5cm) - 1997

Ovulation Prediction Test Kits 1, (53x42.5cm) - 1997

Ovulation Prediction Test Kits 2, (53x42.5cm) - 1997

Ovulation Prediction Test Kits 3, (53x42.5cm) - 1997

The camera passing by my liver (from keyhole surgery), (53x42.5cm) - 1997

Facing the wall of my peritoneum (from keyhole surgery), (53x42.5cm) - 1997

LL photographic prints taken from a video recording, (53x42.5cm) - 1997

Angela Thwaites

Witness I, (2 parts, 35cm long), glass - 1998

Witness II, (85cm long), glass - 1998

Flower, (approx height 50cm), glass - 1997

Pearl Eyes, (longest part 45cm, smallest part 10cm), glass - 1997

Double Vision, (length 25cm), glass - 1997

Sugar Eyes, (length 20cm), glass - 1997

Tear Seeds, (in 7 parts, largest part 20cm long, smallest part 10-11cm long), glass - 1998

Handpiece, (height 15cm), glass - 1997

Emma Woffenden

Womb, (1mx1mx45cm), glass - 1998

Chain, (chain 3m, box on floor 70x50cm), glass - 1998

Bud & Metal Box, (160x75x50cm), glass - 1998

Untitled (Blown Glass Object), (35x32x15cm), glass - 1998

Kim Willis

Navel, (34x26.4x5cm), glass - 1995

Innie, (34x26.4x4cm), glass - 1994

Lying Torso, (41x36x11cm), glass - 1995

The background of the cover is a dark, textured abstract artwork. It features intricate, swirling patterns in shades of gold, silver, and light blue, resembling a nebula or a microscopic view of a material. Numerous small, glowing particles and larger, circular, iridescent spots are scattered throughout the composition, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is ethereal and dynamic.

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